

## Reforming Polish Higher Education in the New Millennium

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The 1990s have been an extremely dynamic period for Polish higher education. After decades of relative stability (although without academic and political freedoms), the academic community was given far-reaching autonomy through a new higher education law passed following the collapse of communism in 1989. For over 10 years, the system has been in a state of serious discord arising from changes in the social environment and new legislative proposals. At a time of rapid growth in enrollments and in the number of private higher education institutions, the system was confronted by decreasing levels of public funding accompanied by a dozen different government proposals to reform higher education. The passage from central governance to self-governance, institutional autonomy, a market orientation, and intellectual freedom occurred at a time of chronic underfunding of public higher education and predictions of necessary faculty dismissals in the future. After over a decade of transformations, the Polish academic community has begun to adjust to the permanent state of uncertainty in which it is currently forced to operate. However, from a broader perspective, the Polish higher education system may be about to pass from its state of constant crisis in the 1990s into one of near collapse—if far-reaching reforms are not introduced.

The rightist Polish government of the last four years was unable to implement the wholesale reform of higher education (although it did start on the reform of primary and secondary education). As a part of these reforms, a system of moderate salary increases had been planned for fall 2001 but have so far not been implemented. Following the September 2001 elections, won by the left, there is a widespread expectation in the Polish academic community that further attempts will be made to introduce reforms of the higher education system, which is still operating on the basis of the old 1990 law.

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It should be noted that Poland is a country of 38 million people, in which the number of students in both the public and private sector totals 1,700,000 (2001) and the number of full-time faculty employed in public institutions

is almost 67,000 (in the private sector, approximately 6,500). In contrast to most Western European countries, there are a growing number of private higher education institutions, which already claim almost 30 percent of total enrollments. The total number of students increased fourfold in the past decade while the number of faculty stayed at the same level, and in the last academic year (2000–2001) there were over 180 private higher education institutions.

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The general feeling of the public today is that something finally needs to be done to reform higher education. While the Polish educational landscape has changed enormously in the last decade, the social and economic landscape has changed as well: the state has sharply reduced public higher education funding levels in the last decade and has begun reforming the public sector, beginning with reforms of the health care system, the social security system, pension schemes, as well as primary and secondary education. Discussions about proposed reform projects have taken place mainly, if not exclusively, among high-ranking segments of the academic community. Virtually no other stakeholders seemed to be involved, either in the process of drafting the new higher education law together with the Ministry of Education or in subsequent public discussions. There was no wider public debate about the new law, not to mention a more general questioning of the role of higher education in a society of the global age.

It is important to bear in mind that higher education funding levels in Poland at the moment are catastrophic, and the remuneration of academics is extremely low, both for those at the beginning of their careers and for senior faculty as well. In 2001, the share of the public funds assigned to science is 0.426 percent and to higher education, 0.83 percent; each year the percentages decline. The expenditures per faculty member in Poland are the lowest in all OECD countries, four times lower than the average in countries in the European Union, and three times lower than in the Czech Republic. The expectations for 2002 are even worse, with projected budgetary deficits of U.S. \$20 billion and cuts forecast in the public sector.

In at least one aspect, the Polish academic profession does not seem to differ from that in most other countries—namely, in the uncertainty of its future. Polish academics still do not know where they are heading as a professional group as no major reform of Polish higher education has been completed. The future of both the public and the private sector is indeterminate in both financial and legal terms. Working conditions and salaries in the public sector have worsened considerably, resulting in frustration and discontent among academics, but at the same time new opportunities have appeared for some in the booming private sector. Academics have certainly not benefited from the economic transformation and reforms to the same degree as other professionals have, especially in the private sector and in administrative positions.

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The probable future developments in Polish higher education include ongoing declining state support for public higher education and far-reaching changes in the structure of academic staff, leading to greater accountability and managerialism, perhaps to partial privatization; and far fewer full-time appointments in favor of part-time contracts, much higher workloads, and a greater emphasis on teaching activities. At the same time, with the increasing role of teaching at the expense of research as the “mission” of the academic profession, a growing division between core full-time academic faculty and peripheral segments of poorly paid, part-time teaching staff is expected. The university career no longer presents an attractive prospect for graduates and recent Ph.D.s. Career opportunities are poor in terms of promotions and, especially, remuneration, which makes it increasingly difficult to get talented young people to enter academia. Current provisions equivalent to tenure for senior scholars will in all probability not be maintained in any new law on higher education and will be replaced with renewable five-year contracts. The strengthening of the private sector and an increasing movement of academics between the public and the private sectors are also expected. Finally, to indicate at least one brighter perspective for the future: Poland is about to enter the European Union (hopefully by 2004) and there will certainly be new possibilities for higher education resulting from closer cooperation with the Western European academic community. In this context, likely Polish membership in the European Union represents a great opportunity for Polish higher education in the coming decade. ■

## Higher Education in Croatia: Unfinished Reform

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The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 triggered not only political changes in the communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Croatia (then one of the Yugoslav republics), but the new pluralist atmosphere also opened the way for the long-awaited reform of the higher education system. Expectations were high, but the road was not to be straight: it soon became clear that, as in other sectors of the society, the damage caused by totalitarian undemocratic rule was much greater than imagined, not only in the visible material destruction but also, and especially, in the mental sphere. This phenomenon was new and unexpected, with no precedents that could provide help and guidance.

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### *The Situation in 1990*

At the moment of the first democratic elections in spring 1990, Croatia had one large university (the University of Zagreb, founded in 1669 and reorganized in 1874, with around 50,000 students) and four smaller new universities (the Universities of Split, Rijeka, and Osijek, founded in the 1970s, with between 6,000 and 10,000 students). Their structure and organization (as in the other Yugoslav republics, but also with similarities to those in the Soviet bloc countries), so different from those of a “normal” university, was a result of almost half a century of Communist Party rule.

The main characteristics of this “model” were: fragmentation of the university, separation of research and teaching, and the bureaucratization of higher education, with no trace of university autonomy or academic freedom.

The university was a loose association of faculties, “independent” research institutes, and other “constituent parts” (e.g., student dormitories, libraries), linked by an agreement transferring certain, mostly formal and ceremonial, functions to the University Assembly, the Academic Council, and the rector. The real power lay in various